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LOS ANGELES TIMES
23 SEPTEMBER 1982

Tangled Process

MX Basing: Agreement Is Elusive

I don't know where we're going to put it, but we're going to have it.

—Ronald Reagan on the MX Missile, August, 1981

By DAVID WOOD,
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WASHINGTON—Sitting on the desk of Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger is a thick folder of reports, technical analyses and a single recommendation: The United States should spend upward of \$25 billion to build the giant MX missile and base it in a series of closely clustered silos.

All the secretary has to do is sign his name endorsing the plan and forward it to the White House by Nov. 1. Not long afterward, if all goes according to schedule, President Reagan will announce plans to go ahead with the MX and the "dense pack" basing mode, as a major step forward for the nation's defense.

The decisions to be taken this fall are almost unimaginably momentous. The cost alone is so great for the MX system that, if ratified by Congress, it will affect the shape and limits of all other defense spending for years to come. And its effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, will influence how the United States fends off the threat of nuclear annihilation well into the 21st Century.

Tangled Political Process

Yet the judgments and analyses on Weinberger's desk do not reflect the best that America's justly celebrated tradition of scientific and technical study can produce, according to many experts. Rather, the latest MX basing proposal—the 39th, by one count—is the result of an extraordinarily tangled process of political maneuvering and compromise.

Already, the MX has consumed \$4.5 billion in tax dollars, as well as countless hours of research and study. And future costs will dwarf expenditures to date. Yet the nation is farther from agreement on the project than when it was first proposed eight years ago.

The story of the MX missile and its search for a home raise disturbing questions about how the United States develops the basic elements in its strategy for national security and how decisions are made on weapons systems that affect not only the nation's survival but its economic and political health.

Defense Spending

With bitter controversy still raging despite all the study, the MX story suggests that the decision-making process has degenerated severely, undermining public confidence in the nation's leaders and breeding skepticism about the wisdom of all defense spending.

Retired Adm. Stansfield Turner, former head of the CIA, says he believes the problem is that "The U.S. military has in effect abdicated responsibility for strategic thinking about nuclear war to civilians."

"Nobody has every fought with these weapons," he observes, "and as a result, civilians can claim almost as much expertise as the military." Nothing wrong with that, he adds, except that the debate splinters into extremes, and "the public sees that neither military nor civilian has thought this problem through very well."

The danger, Turner and others warn, is that in the ensuing squabble and loss of public confidence, problems will go unresolved and national security will be threatened by paralysis.

"The public looks at these schemes—putting the MX on barges in the Great Lakes, on airplanes, buried under mountains, on trains or trucks, in orbit—can you blame anybody for thinking it's crazy?" asks another MX advocate. "The problem is, we damned well have to have something."

At its most basic, the MX was developed to give the United States a new generation of intercontinental nuclear missiles as accurate and powerful as those being deployed by the Soviet Union—and to give this country a deterrent force that could be relied on to escape destruction in an attack by the new Soviet missiles.

Components of the five-story, 96-ton MX rockets, each carrying 10 warheads, have been designed and tested, although the missile has never been fired. They are considered a match for Moscow's best—or worst.

Vulnerability Question

The knotty problem that has caused the controversy is where to put them so they will not be just as vulnerable to Soviet attack as the last-generation U.S. strategic missile, the Minuteman.

Many defense experts believe the latest plan, "dense pack," will work; other are not so sure. But there is wide agreement that it is not as good as strategic missile-basing schemes previously proposed—and rejected.

At its most basic, the dense pack concept holds that the tightly huddled MX missiles would force the Soviets to fire many warheads into a small area, and that the first warheads to go off would destroy later arrivals or blow them off course, allowing an estimated 70% of the MXs to survive.

This "fratricide" effect would make the missiles less vulnerable to a surprise Soviet attack, Pentagon planners say.

One hundred MX's in a "dense pack" are expected to cover a triangular area of only 10 square miles, compared to the rejected Jimmy Carter "race track" system that was to spread 4,600 shelters over hundreds of square miles. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming or Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada are prime candidates as sites for the "dense pack" at present.

If Weinberger rejects the "dense pack" basing concept, many industry and government officials fear that MX itself will be killed. Congress has already rejected Weinberger's favored alternate—"stuffing" the MX missiles into existing Minuteman silos—because then the MX would be just as vulnerable as the present Minuteman missiles, unless empty decoy silos and antimissile defense systems are later added.

Some analysts say a consensus on MX basing is hard to reach because the issue is just too complex and technical for the public, let alone the politicians, to understand. "You're dealing with really way-out physics, and the answers just aren't clear-cut," says William Taylor of the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies. "The President and his staff are really whipsawed—they don't know who to believe."

Others argue that the MX-basing question has been an agonizing one because the age of the giant ICBM is over. "We can't find the answer because there isn't one," says retired Adm. Gene R. LaRocque, who helped plan the current U.S. nuclear "triad" of land-based, sea-based and airborne nuclear strategic forces.